

Message Text

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PAGE 01 QUITO 02743 222226Z

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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 2743

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, EC, PINT

SUBJ: FREEDOM OF THE PRESS: PRADO VS GOE

1. JULIO PRADO, EDITORIAL COLUMNIST AND FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER, HAS GONE UNDERGROUND IN HIS RUNNING BATTLE WITH THE MILITARY JUNTA HEADED BY GENERAL GUILLERMO RODRIGUEZ LARA. THE GOE ISSUED A WARRANT FOR PRADO'S ARREST LAST WEEK, DEMANDING THAT HE PROVIDE DOCUMENTATION FOR HIS CHARGES AGAINST RODRIGUEZ AND THE GOE, BUT THUS FAR HAS FAILED TO SILENCE HIS COLUMN THAT APPEARS REGULARLY IN EL TIEMPO OF QUITO.

2. IN TODAY'S EDITION A COLUMN HEADLINED "PERSECUTION" APPEARS WITH FURTHER PRADO ACCUSATIONS. HE SAID HE AND HIS FAMILY HAVE BEEN PURSUED BY GOVERNMENT AGENTS DAY AND NIGHT, AND ASKED: "WHAT IS THE CRIME THAT HAS BEEN COMMITTED? WHAT CRIME AM I ACCUSED OF? WHAT IS THE BLAME SO MONSTRUOUS THAT ALL THE REPRESSIVE POWER OF THE STATE HAS BEEN UNLEASHED AGAINST A PRIVATE CITIZEN?" PRADO HAS BEEN UNDER GOVERNMENT PRESSURE SINCE HE TOOK RODRIGUEZ TO TASK IN TERMS REMARKABLY SEVERE FOR A PRESS UNDER CONSIDERABLE GOVERNMENT SCRUTINY, CRITICIZING THE PRESIDENT PARTICULARLY ON TWO POINTS: A RETROACTIVE PROMOTION
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 QUITO 02743 222226Z

SIGNED BY THE MINISTER OF DEFENSE WHILE THE PRESIDENT

WAS IN ALGERIA, AND THE EXPENDITURE OF \$600,000 IN GOVERNMENT FUNDS FOR A CROWD OF BUREAUCRATS TO ATTEND THE ALGIERS CONFERENCE.

3. ALMEIDA DENIED THE CHARGES PUBLICLY, OPENING UP A CAN OF WORMS FOR THE GOVERNMENT WHEN PRADO SEIZED THE OPPORTUNITY TO CHALLENGE ALMEIDA TO A TELEVISED DEBATE ON PRADO'S LOADED SUBJECT: "THE RIGHT OF A DICTATORSHIP TO PERPETUATE ITSELF IN POWER AGAINST THE RIGHT OF ECUADOREAN CITIZENS TO FREELY ELECT ITS LEGITIMATE MAGISTRATES". ALMEIDA SPURNED THE DEBATE, BUT THE GOE CONTINUED ITS PRESSURE, WITH TWO THUGS REPORTEDLY BREAKING INTO THE OFFICES OF EL TIEMPO IN THE EARLY MORNING HOURS "LOOKING FOR PRADO".

4. THE PRADO COLUMN TODAY NOTED THAT "DICTATORSHIPS ARE PRONE TO ABUSE AND EXAGGERATED REACTION. NEVERTHELESS WE HAVE HEARD DAILY AND AT ALL HOURS THAT THE GOVERNMENT RESPECTS FREE OPINION, GUARANTEES FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION. HOW TO EXPLAIN, THEN, THAT BY AUTHORITARIAN DECISION OF THE REGIME, WITHOUT JUDGMENT, WITHOUT JUSTIFICATION, WITHOUT KNOWN ACCUSATION, A JOURNALIST IS PURSUED IMPLACABLY FOR THE FACT OF HAVING A DIFFERENT OPINION REGARDING DETERMINED ACTS OF THE GOVERNMENT? BECAUSE IF THE PERSECUTION IS DUE TO MY PRESS COMMENTARIES, THE SOURCES THAT SERVED AS A BASE FOR THEM HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY CLARIFIED. PERHAPS THEY SEEK TO SILENCE THE VOICE OF THE JOURNALIST? IN THE PAST, IN DECLARATIONS FOR THE INTER-AMERICAN PRESS ASSOCIATION, THE REGIME HAS DENIED ANY ACCUSATION OF INTERFERENCE IN FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION. WHAT WILL IT SAY TODAY, HOW WILL IT BE ABLE TO JUSTIFY ITS PERSECUTION IF THE IAPA KNEW WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THESE MOMENTS AGAINST A JOURNALIST WHO DISAGREES WITH OFFICIAL CRITERIA?"

5. PRADO SAID THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD, IF CONVINCED HE IS GUILTY, CHARGE HIM BEFORE A COURT ON GROUNDS OF LIBEL. TO PURSUE HIM AS IT IS DOING NOW, HE SAID, IS A VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS, AND HE POINTED OUT THAT ECUADOR IS A MEMBER OF THE U.N. COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 QUITO 02743 222226Z

6. FINALLY, HE SAID, "WHAT WILL THE PERPETRATORS (OF THIS ABUSE) SAY TOMORROW WHEN A DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT -- WHICH WILL COME SOME DAY -- JUDGES THE ACTS OF THIS DICTATORSHIP AND THE VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS? HOW WILL THEY BE ABLE TO JUSTIFY THIS ARBITRARINESS?"

7. PRADO HAS PICKED UP SUPPORT FROM POLITICAL AND ACADEMIC, AS WELL AS JOURNALISTIC, SOURCES FOR HIS CRITICISMS

OF THE GOVERNMENT, AND THE ECUADOREAN BAR ASSOCIATION HAS SENT A TELEGRAM TO THE MINISTRY OF GOVERNMENT PROTESTING THE ILLEGAL AND UNJUST ARREST ORDER ISSUED AGAINST PRADO DEMANDING ITS REVOCATION AND RESPECT FOR THE LAWS WHICH PROTECT CIVIL LIBERTIES AND THE RIGHT TO FREE EXPRESSION. NEVERTHELESS, THE GOE HAS BEEN STUNG BY THESE ATTACKS AND WILL BE HARD PRESSED TO FIND A COMPROMISE THAT WILL ACCOMMODATE PRADO AND HIS SUPPORTERS WITHOUT LOSING FACE. WE DOUBT THAT PRADO IS THE TYPE OF PERSON THE GOE WOULD WISH TO CONFINED TO THE ORIENTE, AS IT HAS DONE WITH OTHER PERSONS WHO HAVE CRITICIZED THE GOVERNMENT IN HARSH TERMS, ALTHOUGH THEY MAY FEEL COMPELLED TO DO SO IN ORDER TO SQUELCH RECENT OPPOSITIONIST MANEUVERINGS. HEMENWAY

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